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CERTAIN TRUMPETS

The Call of Leaders

Garry Wills

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9.
CONSTITUTIONAL LEADER

George Washington

Max Weber's third social order, the legal-rational type, is not as spectacular as the charismatic order, not as ceremonial as the traditional order. It can seem as dry as the shuffling of a lawyer's briefs. People *contract* with their rulers to set the terms of their submission. This is not an easy accomplishment, as history shows. Revolutions meant to overthrow charismatic or traditional monarchies, meant to reach the ideal of limited rule under law, veer off into dictatorships that are eerily similar to the first evil. The Russian czar is overthrown, only to bring in a tyrannical Stalin. The French king, Louis, gives way to the French emperor, Napoleon. Charles I is beheaded, and Cromwell takes up powers even greater than his.

The most successful transition from monarchy to republicanism took place in America. A cluster of brilliant men, favored by historical circumstance, accomplished that change. But it could have gone awry if the central figure in that transition had been a man of different ambition or less tempered shrewdness. It is one of the most mysterious imaginable cases of successful leadership. Though George Washington rose from dim origins, nothing was more wildly improbable than his return to a quiet private station at the end of his dizzying career.

In 1754, the well-armored powers of Europe crunched around in each other's proximity like wary crustaceans, ready for outright assault. None of them suspected that two slim antennae would touch, half a world away, and jolt the main bodies at home. A young colonel blundering through the back forests of America mistook a diplomatic delegation for an advance French war party, leaped upon it in a sneak attack at dawn, and let his Indian allies scalp the dead French officers—one of whom carried diplomatic credentials.

Outnumbered, later, by the French he had been stalking, this twenty-one-year-old Virginia colonel retreated into a badly situated fortress, suffered casualties, and surrendered on terms that admitted his crime against the dead diplomat. His defense was that he had not understood the French text he was signing. When British regulars were censorious to the young man, he resigned his commission in the colonial militia—Washington's first (and the only nonproductive) withdrawal in a long career of resignings. Without knowing it, he had touched off a world war that would remake the imperial maps of France, England, and Prussia. The young colonel's captured diary was published and execrated in France, and censured in England by King George II. He was a world-famous bungler. Learned men debated whether he was vicious or merely ignorant. His wounded pride took years of salving, and the preservation of his dignity became an overriding concern. He was in Cassio's mood:

> Reputation, reputation, I ha' lost my reputation! I ha' lost the immortal part, sir, of myself, and what remains is bestial. . . .

His fellow Virginians did not judge Washington harshly. He was too useful to his land-developing patrons of the Fairfax family faction. That is why he had been pushed prematurely into such a responsible position. He was a strong and resourceful surveyor of the unknown regions where English land companies competed with French *coureurs de bois* for control of the river system between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. Washington was trustworthy, forceful though somewhat tongue-tied, gigantic even by Virginia's standards, a Natty Bumppo, a John Wayne, a natural leader of men. He, in turn, was dazzled by the educated leaders of Virginia. He was smitten with Sally Fairfax, the married mistress of Belvoir plantation. Young colonials, lacking other entertainment centers, fell in love easily with their hostesses, the versatile managers of huge households—Thomas Jefferson made advances to the married Betsey Walker, and Philip Fithian, a tutor of Nomini Hall, adored his employer's wife from a distance.

Washington had little prospect of advancement but the military. His father, Augustine, had sent two sons by his first marriage to be educated

in England; but the five children of his second marriage—including George—were stranded when Augustine Washington died during George's eleventh year. There would be no education in England for them; and the modest family estate (twenty slaves, only seven of them good workers) was entailed to sons of the earlier marriage.

George was not resentful. In fact, he had a hero worshiper's regard for Lawrence Washington, the half-brother who was fourteen years his elder. Lawrence had served in the Caribbean "War of Jenkin's Ear" under the illustrious Admiral Edward Vernon (Lawrence renamed the family plantation after Vernon). Tobias Smollett sailed with the same 1740 expedition, and described its reverses in the novel *Roderick Random*. Lawrence had already been part of the imperial world his half-brother stumbled into so ingloriously in the next decade.

On his return to Virginia, the charming Lawrence moved as an equal in Fairfax circles and paved the way there for his admiring young relative. But Lawrence was already dying of tuberculosis. The teen-aged George accompanied him on a trip to Barbados, where his brother sought health from the sun and the medical baths. George himself fell ill of the smallpox during this one trip off the American continent—fortunately, since the ordeal gave him immunity to the disease when it was ravaging his troops during the Revolution.

With both half-brothers dead, George fell heir to the renamed Mount Vernon, a small stake to begin with, but one he expanded by marriage and by managerial dedication. In a world of debt and gambling, Washington understood his own "credit" in the broadest sense. He would take the same view of the young republic's credit abroad—he knew it must have financial steadiness at its base. Washington ran his plantation as he would later run his armies, with an eye for detail, for morale, for future contingencies. Respect for him grew. His advice was sought when he entered the House of Burgesses. When Virginia sent its most impressive representatives to confer in Philadelphia on Parliament's aggression, Washington stood out even in that galaxy of talent.

He had, despite his own misgivings about a lack of education, a sense of his own worth and a theatrical flair for impressing others. Even as a young colonial militiaman, he had designed his special uniform. As a civilian at Mount Vernon, he summoned Charles Willson Peale to paint him wearing it. When the time came to choose a colonial commander in chief of the military, Washington declared his availability by appearing uniformed in Philadelphia. After his bad beginning in the Seven Years' War he had proved useful to General Braddock, and acquired the respect and friendship of British officers like Robert Orme. He would have the same success serving with French officers (like Chastellux) in the Revolution. In his remote colonial station, he had become important to the two opposed imperial armies of his era. His central role in the opening scene of conflict between them had been modified in a way no one expected. He had been with the British victors when they wrested Canada away from France. And he would be with the French victors when the seaboard colonies were snatched from British control.

Even in the earliest days of the Revolution Washington had a large *national* vision. Others fought for their individual states. He worked to forge, out of the state militias, a *continental* army. Despite his friendship with Lafayette, he secretly undermined that young officer's attempt to draw British Canada into the fray. Washington knew that reinstating France on the North American continent would hem in the new republic's prospects. Much as he needed French naval and diplomatic help, he would not tie the new country to a second superpower in order to slip out of the first one's orbit. Like the leader of a "non-aligned" third-world country during the Cold War of this century, he played the great powers off against each other.

Even while he created military unity, strengthening Congress's hand over the state legislatures, Washington was working for postwar political unity. At the war's end, he surrendered his military commission, and withdrew from all political office, to back up his final letter to the state governors asking that they create a strong union of the states. When the weak Articles of Confederation disappointed these hopes, Washington kept his pledge to remain in private life for six years. After that, he let himself be "drafted" to serve at the emergency convention in Philadelphia, but only in response to the most strenuous actions taken by Madison and others to secure his attendance.

Directing the "runaway" convention at Philadelphia was the most revolutionary act of Washington's life. He knew that it was acting illegally under the amending provisions of the Articles. That is why the convention kept its proceedings secret until it was disbanded. Washington, elected president of the body, enforced its secrecy with vigor. When it became known that the plotters were repudiating the Articles (the law of the land), only Washington's and Franklin's great reputations saved delegates from the odium of treason. Opponents decried the mobilization of the two men's glory for such a cause:

> The great names of Washington and Franklin have been taken in vain and shockingly prostituted to effect the most infamous purposes.

The denunciation would have been even harsher and more effective if the critics had known everything that went on in the convention—a development the plotters were careful to prevent: they voted that Washington take the minutes of the convention back to Mount Vernon and keep them away from public scrutiny.

When the Constitution was, with difficulty, ratified, it was in part because Washington had stood by it and was foreseen as the first president under it. Had he aimed at a dictatorship—a normal development when governing becomes difficult after a revolution—he might have worn that title, at least for a while. He made clear, by contrast, his respect for Congress, his determination to live by the new law's letter, and his desire to serve only one term. A farewell address—composed by James Madison—was prepared for his resignation after the first term; but once again Washington was drafted into further service, even critics admitting that his country needed him. The same thing was urged after his second term; but this time he was adamant. His published farewell address, drafted by Alexander Hamilton this time, returned to his old message from the war—that America should not be drawn into the imperial struggles of the great powers. The new republic must not form its ethos in the midst of military adventures. The Napoleonic wars tempted Anglophiles like Hamilton and Francophiles like Jefferson to join the kings or the rebels in ideological conflicts over European legitimacy. Washington's counsel was so far heeded that when Jefferson took office, five years later, he did so with a pledge against "entangling alliances" that is often misattributed to Washington's farewell address. It conveys that document's meaning, though not its phrasing.

Washington's refusal to bring about a strong central government by *seizing* power is his greatest legacy to the nation. He who began as an agent of the Fairfaxes kept clear in his mind that he was an agent of the Congress when leading warriors, and an agent of the people when governing. He wielded power by yielding it. His fame spread through Europe as the new Cincinnatus, the ancient Roman who left his army to return to the plow. His reputation, the dearest thing to him, was bound up in service. To seize power in any way that hurt his reputation would be felt as the greatest defeat by Washington. His honor and the nation's were mutually pledged, one worthless without the other.

It had been the dream of some political theorists, ever since Plutarch's time, to vindicate classical myths of the legendary founders of states—Lycurgus, Theseus, Solon, Numa—as men able to establish power they could walk away from. Guicciardini criticized the "realist" Machiavelli for retaining the vision of such an ideal ruler. Yet Madison found the ideal realized in the Philadelphia convention, which intervened where ordinary procedures were of no avail, produced a new law, and then disbanded itself. In a crisis unprovided for by previous law (the Articles of Confederation),

> since it is impossible for the people spontaneously and universally to move in concert towards their object, it is therefore essential that such changes be instituted by some *informal and unauthorized propositions* made by some patriotic and respectable citizens or numbers of citizens. (*The Federalist*, No. 40)

The convention performed the role of the Lawgiver as described in Rousseau's *Social Contract* (2.7): "He holds no office, and does not partake of the sovereign. His task, which is to institute the republic, has no place within that republic's constitution."

Washington, the president, protector, and guarantor of the Philadelphia convention, was the lawgiver supreme—holding no office at the time, bringing a plan from nowhere for the people to accept, then stepping away from the ratification process. Even as the first executive, he stayed only to make sure the plan was firmly in place. Then, like Romulus, he disappeared—not amid rumors that he was spirited off to make sure that the law (rather than a man) should be obeyed. Washington left of his own free will, living up to the legends only approximated by mythical figures. The man whose life began in an obscure scuffle of the major European powers fulfilled, at last, classical Europe's dream of a figure who might create a state without ensnaring himself in its very structure.

His accomplishment was so great and unusual that it is hard to estimate at its true worth. Washington has managed to become dull—though his contemporaries thought him the most exciting man in the room, even when the other men in the room were Franklin and Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton. Both scholars and most Americans tend to rate him second to Lincoln among United States presidents. But Lincoln had less than a decade of greatness (1858–1865), after an otherwise undistin-

guished life. Washington was "the indispensable man" (as James Flexner puts it) in crisis after crisis—the Revolution in the 1770s, the formation of the republic in the 1780s, the conduct of the nascent government in the 1790s. He was what Henry Lee called him, "first in war and first in peace." He was a shrewd judge of men and had a self-knowledge that never carried him into the excesses of ambition or despair. Others have *conducted* constitutional government well. He set up such a government, established its precedents, faced all its problems, with no guidelines based on earlier performance.

During the early struggles of the nation, Washington was himself the unifying icon, the symbol of the whole process. He had to replace his own glamour with the more impersonal symbols of power—the Constitution, the flag, the offices of government, the courts. He learned an elaborate language of tact and protocol, receiving respect because of his office, not his person. He stripped away as soon as possible all emblems of his military glory. He would not wear the medal of the Society of the Cincinnati, the elite club of revolutionary officers—and he threatened to resign if that body did not cease to be hereditary. It was typical that, at the inauguration of his successor as president (John Adams), the newly sworn-in vice president (Thomas Jefferson) stepped back to let the ex-president follow Adams out of the chamber—but Washington refused the honor, recognizing Jefferson as the current official of the people. This is the paradox of leadership in a legal system—it asserts authority by deferring to it, as Washington wielded power by giving it up. The authority is that of the contract—in America's case, the authority of the people. It was mentioned earlier that all American presidents are, under the Constitution, legal-system and not charismatic leaders, however glamorous they might seem. That is preeminently true of Washington, who did have (initially) a charismatic authority, of which he divested himself in order to establish the *republic*'s claims. A look at the table on page 104 will make it clear how Washington moved from the role in the left column to the attributes in the right column.

In all of this, Washington—who was as entirely self-educated as Lincoln—showed a profound understanding of the nature of representative democracy. Though he presided over the convention that drafted the Constitution, he stepped down daily when it formed a "committee of the whole" to go off the record. While a committee chairman presided, Washington made few but telling interventions. Most of the time he was listening to the intense discussions that none of his contemporaries outside that room would ever read. (We know them from Madison's extensive notes, not published until 1840.) Washington absorbed Madison's vision of the republic's leaders as distillers of the wisdom and virtue of the whole people. It was an intense seminar Washington took with the principal theorist of the Constitution taking shape.

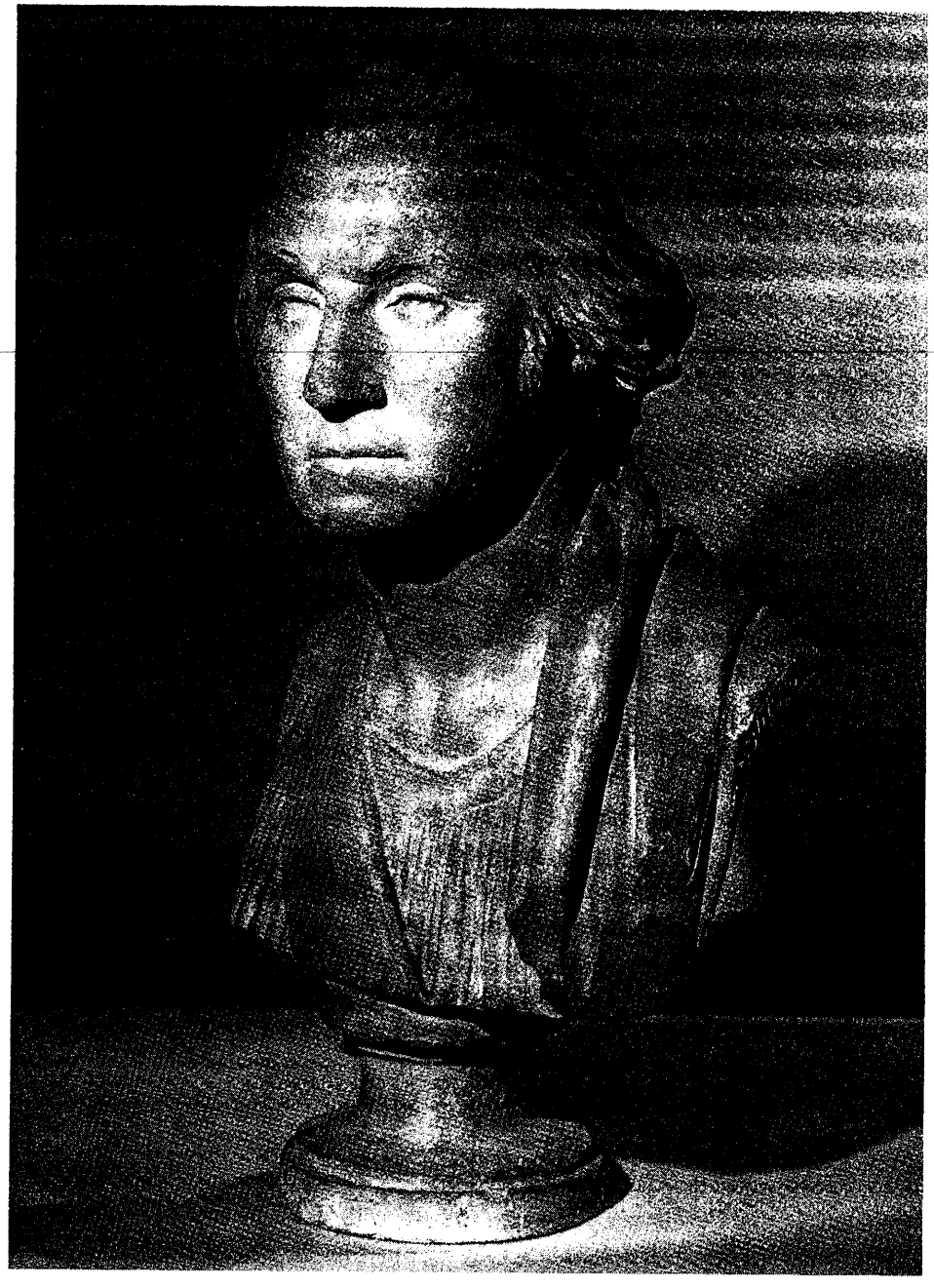
To speak for the nation, Washington had to transcend his own limits. Leading the revolutionary army, he ceased in some measure to be a Virginian looking to his own state's interests. He forged a corps around him that was *national* in its outlook, a prefiguring of the government he would later lead. At the head of that government, he distanced himself from the regional peculiarity of slavery, not letting his servants be seen by the public. By building up a fund for the purpose, he managed to free his own slaves at his wife's death—his estate was still paying for the freed former slaves' support well into the nineteenth century. It was his belief that a leader must *be* virtuous in order to represent a virtuous people. Yet representative leadership does not mean unquestioning subservience to those who are represented. It means the enlightened quest for what is the *best* interest of the people, a quest subject to that people's final judgment, one helping to shape that judgment in a dialogue between the elected and the electors. What Madison said of the Senate's role in our system could also be taken as a description of Washington's neutrality policy at a time when various factions in the new-born republic clamored for war:

> An attention to the judgment of other nations is important to every government for two reasons: The one is that, independently of the merits of any particular plan or measure, it is desirable on various accounts that it should appear to other nations as the offspring of a wise and honourable policy. The second is that, in doubtful cases, particularly where the national councils may be warped by some strong passion or momentary interest, the presumed or known opinion of the impartial world may be the best guide that can be followed. (*The Federalist*, No. 63)

Washington won the respect of "the impartial world" as few leaders of a new nation ever have.

What made for such leadership? His contemporaries gave it the simple but majestic name of "virtue." They meant by that *public* virtue, republican virtue, a devotion to the commonweal, as in the mythical Rome celebrated by the Enlightenment.

If we look at other revolutionary leaders, from Caesar to Cromwell to Napoleon, we have to conclude that it is even harder to give up power than to acquire it. Napoleon began as "Citizen Bonaparte" and ended as the emperor. Washington began as a client in the aristocratic circles of the Fairfaxes, went on to be the first general to win a modern revolutionary war, then the president of an entirely new nation—and he ended up as Citizen Washington. Washington's massive determination, yet principled submission, is perfectly captured in the Roman bust Houdon created on classical models.



George Washington
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY

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Oliver Cromwell

Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) moved from a legitimate to a charismatic role, reversing the course followed by Washington. Yet there were surface similarities in their careers. Both led military rebellions against English monarchs—Cromwell against Charles I, Washington against George III. Each took local militias—the "train bands" of Cromwell, the colonel levies of Washington—and forged professional armies on a national scale. Each infused a new ethos into his troops—a religious spirit in Cromwell's case, a post-colonial American identity in Washington's.

Cromwell's rebellion was a more rending affair altogether. Washington withdrew from the king some of the Crown's colonial possessions. Cromwell not only overthrew the king, but killed and replaced him. Though he did not intend this at the outset—or for a long time after hostilities began—events swept him into the reenactment of some of the executive arrogancies that the Civil War was launched to remedy.

Cromwell had entered his forties by the time the Civil War began. A great horseman and falconer, though he had no military experience, he showed a natural genius for cavalry movements. The royal troops were best in that arm, and had their best leader, Prince Rupert, in command of it. But successful English cavalry charges tended to dissipate themselves in pursuit of the broken enemy. This showed how desultory had been England's insular fighting of the early seventeenth century, when the dispersal of ragged mobs was the chief task for the king's guards.

Cromwell checked the headlong charges of his cavalry. His men rode so close that "every left-hand man's right knee must be locked under his right-hand man's left ham." This meant that he could react in mid-charge to new developments, continue to shape the troop's action after it had broken through the enemy line: "Cromwell, after a first charge, could succeed in getting his men together for a second, while Rupert could not." This gave him, in effect, a reserve force *within* his attack force, something new on British battlefields.

Religion was important to this military achievement. The King, who had imposed bishops on resisting Presbyterians, found himself faced with a "preaching, praying, and drilling" army. The Parliament called to finance Charles was opposed to bishops, and it financed, instead, the antimonarchical force being raised at the time. When the king was in captivity, the army refused to disband itself until it had received full pay, and at Newmarket it dictated terms to Parliament in its Solemn Engagement (1647). This rebellion of the military against the civilian authority resembled the mutiny of Washington's officers at Newburgh (1783). But Cromwell, after some hesitation, promoted the Engagement at Newmarket. Washington rebuked and broke the rebellion at Newburgh. From those two acts, the men's successive careers diverged. Washington retired to civilian life and supported the creation of a strong but legal government. Cromwell used the army to break, discipline, and finally dissolve Parliament. As lord protector, he summoned, packed, and dismissed Parliaments in ways more high-handed than Charles had ever dared to.

Though Cromwell toyed with the idea of the crown, the reluctance of the army made him put it aside. Yet he adopted the style of a king's court at Hampton Palace, and he appointed his son to be his successor. Carlyle said of Cromwell that he could "not get resigned" from the duties his time thrust on him, and contrasted him in this with "George Washington, no very immeasurable man." It is true that few who rise by military rebellion can give back the power they assume in that process. Caesar, Napoleon, Stalin, Fidel, Mao all go the way of Cromwell. They cannot *get* resigned. This shows the tremendous originality of Washington, who brought legal rule out of the false dilemma posed in revolutionary times—either charisma or chaos. His dull legality is the brilliant exception where brilliant supermen have been routine.